



Figure 1 Lorenzo Lotto, *The Annunciation*, 1535, Pinacoteca Civica, Recanati

## Apocalypse Now: A Psychology of Conception in Lorenzo Lotto's *Annunciation* of 1535

Irene Cioffi Whitfield Ph.D.

Judged by conventional iconography Lorenzo Lotto's *Annunciation* of 1535 is uncanny, uncomfortable and strangely at odds with typical representations of this seminal subject (Fig. 1). However if "read" like a dream it carries its own insights into an archetypal realm where the son of God is incarnated in a young virgin who becomes a mother. Her son is divine and human. The conception is divine and human. The Annunciation is a paradox that Jung described as a moment of synchronicity -- when eternal and serial time intersect and meaning is born. As the Christian myth tells us, this announcement and conception of the divine, which we could also describe psychologically as the manifestation of the Self, can only materialize in the human individual and it carries an enormous potential for imagination and creativity. Along with many others, Lotto's painting tells us that virginity is a vital precondition for conception to occur, but uniquely, he relates a sense of emotional tension and conflict, along with a highly enigmatic quality of that feminine virgin state, which is both the vessel of creativity and the medium of its inception into the material world of human consciousness.

A dictionary definition of the verb, *to announce*, tells us that its roots stem from the Latin *annuntiare* which combines two stems: *ad nuntiare* meaning to report and *nuntius*, the messenger. A reporting which includes a messenger. Along with "to proclaim and make known publicly," the verb also means "to indicate beforehand, foretell". In Lorenzo Lotto's painting, as in all others of the same subject the announcement of a divine conception is delivered by the Angel Gabriel to the young Virgin Mary. Conceive, from the Latin *concepire* is to take in, to cause to begin, to originate. Other meanings link the word to *image*, *imagination* and *apprehension*. *Apprehend* means to "arrest and seize" as well as "to perceive and understand meaning". The heightened affect of Lotto's young

Virgin who has been chosen to serve as the mother of Jesus suggests many things at once -- visceral fear, sudden seizure, foreboding insight, the uncomfortable border between life and death. These are all present at the moment of incarnation.

Lotto was a compelling creative personality who created an image that is still fascinating today. The painting he made represents a complex paradox. On one hand, it is an individual creation that came through the prism of Lotto's own psychic complexes (ie., it demonstrates the eccentric individuality of Lotto's own personality and is recognizable as his invention). On the other, it is an archetypal creation which completely transcends the artist himself.

In modern psychological terms Jung described creativity as an autonomous complex that overcomes the conscious ego-complex:

“You will remember that I described the nascent work in the psyche of the artist as an autonomous complex... it is not subject to conscious control, and can be neither inhibited nor voluntarily reproduced. Therein lies the autonomy of the complex; it appears and disappears in accordance with its own inherent tendencies, independently of the conscious will.<sup>1</sup>

The constant creation of images is a spontaneous and constant psychic function that happens in all of us and is not determined by conscious will. This insight into psychological reality was presaged in the 12<sup>th</sup> century by Meister Eckhart who described creation as an autonomous, spontaneous and supra-ordinate process with the individual as its natural host:

Here in time we make holiday because the eternal birth  
which God the Father bore and bears unceasingly in eternity

---

<sup>1</sup> C.G. Jung, “On the Relation of Analytical Psychology to Poetry,” (1922), CW 15, 78, 122.

is now born in time in human nature. St. Augustine says that this birth is happening always. But if it happens not in me, what does it profit me? What matters is that it happens in me.<sup>2</sup>

Great visual inventors like Lotto are gifted with an ability to translate psychic images almost directly from the archetypal realm of the objective psyche to be “announced” to the rest of us. The complex birth of the psychic image and the vital importance of this process for the advancement of human consciousness is stressed by Jung in his discourse on “Medicine and Psychology” delivered to doctors at the Swiss Academy of Medicine in May 1945:

. . .without consciousness it would never have become known that there is such a thing as a world, and without the psyche there would be absolutely no possibility of knowledge, since the object must go through a complicated physiological and psychic process of change in order to become a psychic image. This image alone is the immediate object of knowledge. The existence of the world has two conditions: it to exist, and us to know it.”<sup>3</sup>

In psychological terms Lotto’s image stands as an autonomous and archetypal symbol of Annunciation, and in this sense, it is far more than a respectful narration of the biblical scene at Nazareth recounted in St Luke 1:27-38. Jung spoke so movingly of symbols and of art that it is impossible not to quote him in the context of Lotto’s painting of the pregnant young Madonna:

---

<sup>2</sup> Meister Eckhart, “Wisdom of Solomon,” 18:14, quoted in C.G. Jung, “Rex and Regina,” (1955-56), CW 14, 318, 444. note. 246.

<sup>3</sup> C.G. Jung, “On the Relation of Medicine and Psychotherapy”, (1945), CW 16, 89, 201.

“...we spoke of art as a tree growing out of nourishing soil, we might equally well have compared it to a child growing in the womb.”<sup>4</sup>

“[as for] works that are openly symbolic...their pregnant language cries out to us that they mean more than they say. ...A symbol remains a perpetual challenge to our thoughts and feelings. That probably explains why a symbolic work is so stimulating, why it grips us so intensely, but also why it seldom affords us a purely aesthetic enjoyment.<sup>5</sup> ...For a symbol is the intimation of a meaning beyond the level of our present powers of comprehension.<sup>6</sup>

Born in Renaissance Italy through the vehicle of Lotto's idiosyncratic artistic imagination and incarnated in oil on canvas by his own hand, the image is still arresting despite its great age. Looking at it through the historical prism of five centuries, it still tests the limits of our present powers of comprehension. Received anew as an “immediate object of knowledge” it is interesting to reflect on what Lotto’s image tells us about the psychological nature of annunciation and its relevance to mankind today.

---

<sup>4</sup> C.G. Jung, “On the Relation of Analytical Psychology to Poetry”, (1922), CW 15, 78, 122.

<sup>5</sup> C.G. Jung, *Ibid.*, 77,119.

<sup>6</sup> C.G. Jung, *Ibid.*, 76,118.

## ***DIVINE COMMOTION AND ARTISTIC TEMPERAMENT***

Judging from the evidence presented by Lotto's sixteenth-century biographer Giorgio Vasari, the creation of this masterpiece seems to have affected its creator. As an artistic personality Lotto was rediscovered by Bernard Berenson (1865-1959), a man of Freud's generation, who called him "the first psychologist" due to his highly idiosyncratic and evocatively moody style, which recalled modern man's angst.<sup>7</sup> Taking Lotto's edgy personality into account, in 1943 Francesco Arcangeli described the *Annunciation*: as "One of the most profound and intense inventions in all of Italian painting"; "A masterpiece of trepidation and sadness: inevitable emotions when it comes to Lotto."<sup>8</sup>

By all contemporary accounts Lotto was "restless and a wanderer".<sup>9</sup> An anxious and solitary man who never married or had children of his own, his temperament was characterized as one of "prickly hypersensitivity."<sup>10</sup> Lotto's own description of himself in 1546, seven years before he retired to the religious lay community of the Holy House at Loreto, is poignantly moving: "I am alone, untethered, and very unquiet of mind."<sup>11</sup> Vasari tells us that by the time Lotto had settled in Loreto in August 1552, he had "almost entirely lost his voice," a telling symptom long associated with hysterical phenomena.<sup>12</sup> The artist's final years

---

<sup>7</sup> Bernard, Berenson, *Lorenzo Lotto, An Essay in Constructive Art Criticism*, London, 1895, (1901 ed.), 254f.

<sup>8</sup> Flavio Caroli, *Lorenzo Lotto e la nascita della psicologia moderna*, Milan, 1980, 186, cites F. Arcangeli (1943) "E' una della piu' profonde e intense invenzioni di tutta la pittura italiana... . Capolavoro della trepidazione, della tristezza: i sentimenti inevitabili di Lotto."

<sup>9</sup> Berenson, 1901, 278

<sup>10</sup> For Lotto's personal character see "Lorenzo Lotto: Life and Work," an essay by Peter Humphry in *Lorenzo Lotto: Rediscovered Master of the Renaissance*, (exh. Cat. National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC), New Haven, London, 1997, 6-13.

<sup>11</sup> Peter Humphry, *Ibid.*, 1, ... "nella eta e solo, senza fidel governo e molto inquieto della mente."

<sup>12</sup> Giorgio Vasari, *Opere di Giorgio Vasari, Pittore e Architetto Aretino*, Florence, MDCCCXXII, "Vita di Jacopo Palma ed Altri", [Lorenzo Lotto], 484, "Finalmente essendo Lorenzo vecchio ed avendo quasi perduta la voce . . . se n'ando alla Madonna di Loreto... ." See Niel Micklem, *The*

spent in service to the sacred Madonna at the Holy House calmed his restless spirit and it was there that he found "happiness and full tranquility of soul" <sup>13</sup> According to legend, the Holy House in Loreto was inhabited by the Virgin Mary at the time of the Annunciation in Nazareth and miraculously transported by angels from there to Loreto in 1295.<sup>14</sup> The fact that Lotto ended his days in Mary's house of Annunciation is evocatively symbolic and suggests that the subject he painted so remarkably was psychologically meaningful to him.

It is moving to know that Lotto's anxious and ungrounded psychological state was transformed when he reposed within the confines of a sacred feminine vessel, a symbol personified in this case, by the Holy House at Loreto where the artist finally settled. Like the medieval myth of the unicorn tamed on the lap of a virgin, the symbolic image of annunciation that was born of Lotto's vivid imagination suggests that intensely spiritualized and animated masculine spirit can only be "captured" on receptive, passive and feminine ground, and when it is, the effect is transforming. This very thing seems to have happened to Lotto himself. Knowing what we do about his skittish "cat-like" personality, one could imagine a primordial archetypal activation bursting through Lotto's fragile ego-consciousness to "announce" this peculiar image to him. Such would indicate that an exquisitely receptive and virgin quality in Lotto's own psyche received this highly unusual image of annunciation from a numinous realm far beyond ego-consciousness, and "mothered" it through his subtle artistry into material reality to therapeutic effect.

---

Nature of Hysteria, London, 1996, who discusses the creative potential of the hysterical ego-complex, a psychological factor which is particularly apt in Lotto's case.

<sup>13</sup> Vasari, Ibid., 485, "I quali ultimi anni della sua vita provo egli felicissimi e pieni di tranquillita d'anima. . . ."

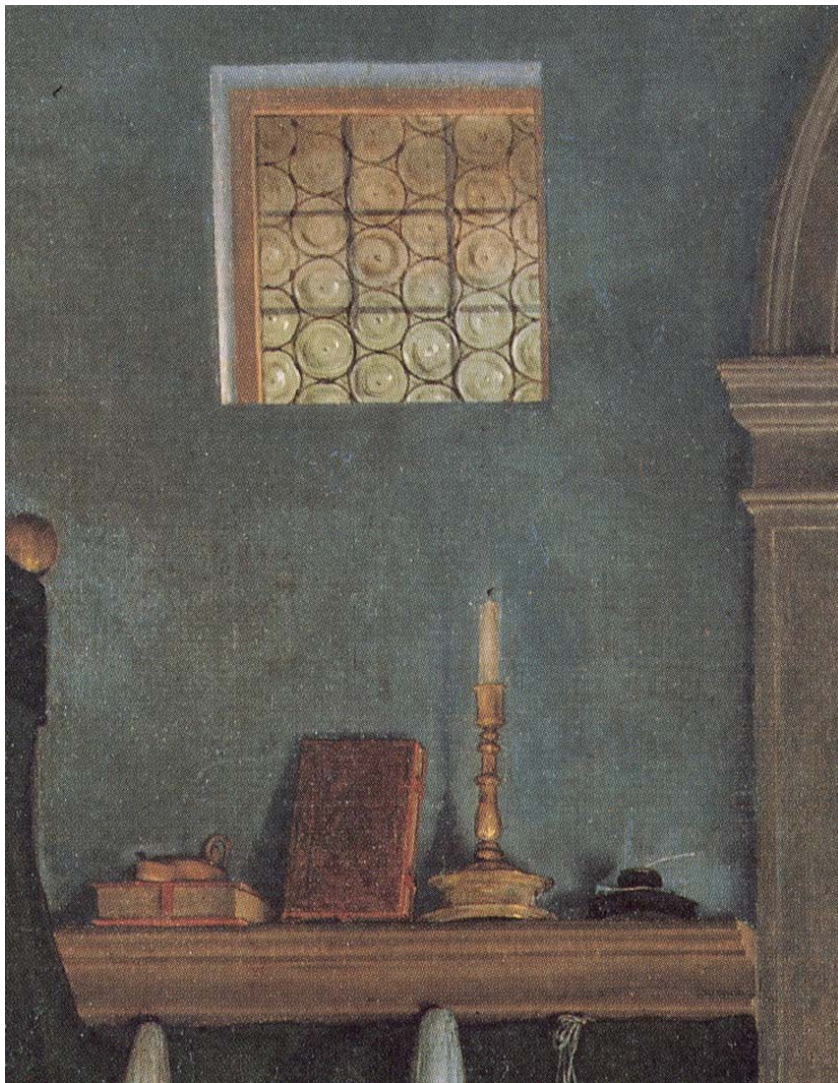
<sup>14</sup> F.L. Cross and E.A. Livingstone, eds. The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, Oxford, 1984, 836f.

## READING THE IMAGE

In Lotto's hands, the *Annunciation* is set in the Virgin's bedroom which is presented as an elegantly simple chamber that suggests the ample proportions, architectural grandeur and sensuous comforts of a noble Renaissance palazzo. The imposing architecture is emphasised by the tall classically arched portal that is cut off at the top, well below the ceiling level, and leads outside to an *alfresco* portico with a wooden soffit. Beyond is a decorous formal garden arranged with roses, umbrella pines and cypress trees. The static poise and serene organization of the Italian garden contrasts with the divine commotion taking place in the bedroom and the portico, a transitional space between inside and outside. Here the dynamic figure of God the Father is shown diving into the scene with penetrating eyes directly fixed on the Virgin.

One of the many unusual element in Lotto's picture is its depiction of the animating instant. This is suggested in several ways. Like a snap shot taken very quickly and not consciously framed, Lotto's image is cropped at all four sides omitting portions of the bed, the ceiling, the portal, the angel's arm and Mary's wooden platform. A sense of spontaneous action is also communicated in the emotive expression of the kneeling Virgin, a comely young girl who twists away from her open book in a sudden gesture of wide-eyed surprise. The startled cat with front paws off the ground and the youthful angel, whose hair stands out horizontally at right angles from its head, are also caught in an awkward instant. Another emphatic element of time is indicated by the inclusion of the hourglass set on the small stool directly behind the cat. With sand shown in equal measure above and below the midpoint of the glass container, it is fixed at a precise borderline in time that marks the waxing and waning of the hour.





*Figure 2 Lorenzo Lotto, Detail: Genre Elements*

It is interesting to see how Lotto juxtaposes this strangely agitated moment of annunciation with a restful chamber of sleep. The tension of rest and unrest held together in a pregnant instance of incarnation is underscored by the tranquil domestic elements (candlestick, inkwell, night cap and prayer shawl) which contrast with the twisting Virgin, who is clad in the same red and blue hues as God the Father (Fig. 2). A thin blue sash tied Empire style just under her breast seems to accentuate a gently swollen belly under the ample folds of her

simple robes. In this state, already suggestive of blossoming pregnancy, Mary turns her back upon the higher learning of her reading book to directly engage the viewer with moon-faced awe and almond-eyed wonder. The startling proximity of the Virgin to the implied witness of the scene is highly unusual, ignoring traditional decorum which set the scene of sacred incarnation at a more reserved distance. Uniquely, Lotto places us, the implied observer, towards the center of the composition as if kneeling just before Mary and meeting the uncanny gaze of her outward looking eyes. This motif gives Lotto's image a vibrant immediacy which is further strengthened by Mary's youthful sensuality and emotive body language.



Figure 3 Lorenzo Lotto, Detail, *The Virgin Annunciate*

In this context, Mary's hand gesture is also worthy of note (Fig. 3). The Virgin's upheld hand with palms forward mirrors the ancient *allocutio* gesture

with which the ancient Romans hailed the emperor. The early Christians subsequently used the same solemn gesture both in images of Christ greeted by his followers, and in *orante* figures shown in prayer. In this context, however, the gesture, coupled with the Virgin's gyrating body movement and enigmatic gaze resonates with shock and unease. The emotional tension is heightened by the unusual inclusion of a startled cat, who in a pose oddly echoing that of the Virgin, is shown in a twisted position with its front paws upraised completely off the ground (fig. 4). Moving its body quickly forward towards the left, the cat's head is turned backwards with frightened eyes fixed directly on the onrushing figure of the Archangel Gabriel.



*Figure 4 Lorenzo Lotto, Detail, Cat and Hourglass*

As an angel, Gabriel is specifically identified as the harbinger of both life and death. This herald of incarnation at the Annunciation also blows the final trumpet signaling the Day of Judgment, and his depiction here by Lotto is compelling. With electric gaze and windblown hair he sweeps upon the scene with the twisting ecstatic pose of a Dionysian satyr (fig. 5). Clad in cool sky-blue robes and bounding into the Virgin's bedroom as if carried by a sudden strong wind, Gabriel fixes his dark and penetrating eyes directly on the comely young maiden and lands on the ground at speed, perched solely on his unclad left foot and right knee. In his left hand, resting on a muscular thigh as if to steady himself, Gabriel holds a large stalk of white lilies, a conventional symbol of virginal purity, that rise from from his hand like an exclamation point. The angel's strong and handsome right arm is upraised towards God and the tips of its long and elegant fingers appear to cup the top edge of its wings, which are not the typical white and multicolored bird's feathers, but cool blue-green like Psyche's.<sup>15</sup> Gabriel's material substance is underscored by the distinctive shadow cast on the earth-colored floor of the Virgin's room. The cat, the Virgin, the bench holding the hourglass, and the balustrade in the portico also cast strong shadows, unlike God, whose nature is pure spirit. God is also the source of the emphatic light source emanating from His direction at the upper right and illuminating His hair, robes and clouds and falling onto the large portal, low table, and *prie-dieu*. Penetrating more deeply into the room, it illuminates the Virgin's face, hands and garments which glow in its radiance.

---

<sup>15</sup> "The angel has waving flaxen hair and wears a blue robe...His bluish-green wings are not like a bird's but like Psyche's." Berenson, 1901, 176.



*Figure 5 Lorenzo Lotto, Detail, The Angel Gabriel*

Lotto's quirky cast of characters, which include the outside viewer, are dynamically linked together through emphatic eye contact that heightens the emotional tenor of the picture. This agitated zigzag movement begins at the upper right from where God stares down at the Virgin. As if stunned by this gaze, the Virgin turns and looks outwards towards the viewer. Included in the sacred action, we see the agitated and startled cat straight ahead, who, unaware of us,

stares at Gabriel. Taking no notice of the frightened animal, Gabriel focuses directly on the Virgin as she brings us into the picture.

## **THE DESCENT OF FIERY SPIRIT**

Vitally linked to the autonomous “creativity complex” that Jung describes is the virgin conception of the savior, which he understood as a seminal metaphor for the regenerative nature of the objective psyche and the constellation of the Self. Essential to this formulation is a supreme masculine spirit that begets the divine child:

“... the reborn is his own begetter. Quite in keeping with this is the extraordinary assertion of the virgin conception. . . psychologically it tells us that the content of the unconscious (‘child’) has come into existence without the natural help of the human father (ie. Consciousness). It tells us, on the contrary, that some god has begotten the son and further that the son is identical with the father, which in psychological language means that a central archetype, the God-image, has renewed itself (“been reborn”) and become ‘incarnate’ in a way perceptible to consciousness. The ‘mother’ corresponds to the ‘virgin anima’ who is not turned towards the outer world and is therefore not corrupted by it. She is turned towards the ‘inner sun’, the archetype of transcendent wholeness – the self.”<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> C.G. Jung, “The Duel Mother,” (193), CW, 5, 323, 497.



*Figure 6 Lorenzo Lotto, Detail, God the Father*

While it is rare to show God, the personification of the objective psyche, in scenes of the Annunciation, Lotto uniquely depicts Him as the God of Revelation: His head and His hair were white like wool and His eyes were a flame of fire,” (Rev.1:14) (Fig. 6). God’s heightened emotionality, along with the reactive Virgin and her animal companion and counterpart, the frightened cat, viscerally suggest the edgy psychological quality of numinous experience and its powerful archetypal energy. The blue and red coloration of God’s robes, which are echoed in those of the Virgin, suggests the poles of the archetype which stretches from spirit to matter, heaven and earth. Through the colors of the robes that touch her

skin she is intimately associated with God and could be identified as what Jung described as “the archetypal *numen* of female deity”.<sup>17</sup>

Here the focus of the Virgin’s shock and her cat’s fear is not God, who is above them, behind them and totally unseen, but the dynamic messenger angel, who causes upset by penetrating Mary’s intimate chamber of sleep. The Virgin’s heightened state of psychological agitation at the entry of the Gabriel is virtually unknown in Renaissance painting and goes far beyond the implications of the biblical narrative of Luke I 27:38. Indeed, there is no sense of stasis and peace in Lotto’s vision of incarnation but rather a fateful encounter between heaven and earth. These two regions, personified by the Virgin and God, are mediated by the activated visitor angel who moves between the two realms on a rush of agitated wind -- the *pneuma* of creation. In Lotto’s image, Gabriel rushes, unbound, into the chamber of sleep through a wide portal in a thick stone wall with no door, suggesting that the unsettling announcing spirit can enter freely at any time. This psychic mediation taking place in a bedroom is another symbolic reference for the lowering of ego-consciousness necessary for creative conception from the objective psyche. The intense psychic heat of the archetypal activation personified by Gabriel’s fiery aspect is mitigated by the blue-green of his robes and wings, which communicates a vital cooling down of the searing God spirit as it reaches down into material matter. His landing on earth-colored floor indicates the grounding of volatile masculine spirit in the moistness of the feminine earth. It is psychologically true to say that when ideas that come to us are made real, that brings greater stability. If we have an idea for a sturdy chair and we actually make one, we can then sit on it and it will support us.

---

<sup>17</sup> C.G. Jung, “III The Personification of the Opposites,” (1955-56), CW, 14, 187, 186.



In Lotto's image, the ineffable spirit of God blazes in from an unseen realm outside our view. Like the sun's radiance that can damage the human retina, the deity's diving-in potential seems enormous – surely too strong to be taken in directly by the young Virgin held within his penetrating focus. As the myths of Semele and Medusa tell us, to witness divinity directly courts immolation and stony death. In a clinical context, this ancient taboo is echoed in the striking words of a young patient suffering from schizophrenia, who explained the onset of illness as such: "I know what happened to me, I looked God directly in the eye, that's what happened to me."<sup>18</sup>

It is noteworthy and psychologically important that in Lotto's painting the Virgin's eyes never meet those of either God or Gabriel, who stare directly at her, but only those of the human viewer who share her human nature and, by implication, her fate. The Virgin shows that in the presence of the divine we must keep our eyes directly fixed on the human or else be taken by a dangerous inflation. From this we see that modest and submissive action is at the heart of creative incarnation. A humble and non-intellectual attitude is especially important when faced with an annunciation that implies, vis-a-vis Gabriel, an inrush of a dynamic content from the objective psyche. Swift as quicksilver, his movement is inward and downward, suggesting an *abaissement* that is both fruitful and dangerous to the stability of ego-consciousness. The wild-eyed and youthful angel clad in sky-blue knows the exact location of the animating spirit and is shown pointing straight up to God. As a psychological image he personifies an autonomous psychic energy and his electrifying presence captures the scintillating quality of mercurial imagination. Psychologically, it is of paramount

---

<sup>18</sup> This conversation was recounted to me by someone who had spoken to the patient directly. I have no further information about the case.

importance that the angel has both feet on the ground. To absorb the force of autonomous psychic images one must have a stable and grounded psychological constitution supported by the grounding authority of the Self.

The ancient cabalists referred to Gabriel as “the supervisor of dreams,” and this is an identity that is strongly felt in Lotto’s image. Bursting into the Virgin’s bedroom like a meteor hitting the earth, he carries the explosive energy of a nightmare that forces us to wake out of a deep sleep. When this animated element comes into play it brings the full force of a new reality to us in an uncanny blast. This is a pregnant instant of reckoning and re-cognition. Searing new insights from the objective psyche could allow us to see ourselves and others with new eyes. It could also just blow our minds and precipitate psychiatric collapse.

Nothing is born, least of all human beings, without a hellish bodily struggle in the bloody “gut” realm of Mother. In our human experience, birth brings us into being, and death takes us out of it. And all transitions, even banal ones (like misplacing your passport at the airport) contain elements of vulnerability and danger. Lotto’s Gabriel shows us that a divinely charged psychic spirit is with us in all moments of transition and that this is the instant when the potential for creative insight and psychic renewal is at its most fruitful and most dangerous ebb.

Like the mortal Mary and her frightened cat counterpart, Lotto’s descending archangel casts an emphatic shadow. In fact, scriptural sources imply that like ourselves, angels have free will that allows them to ignore or even disobey divine inspiration and to suffer the consequences of what could be termed “sin”. In one such instance, Gabriel himself “remained for a while outside

the heavenly curtain,” for failing to obey God’s command “exactly as given”.<sup>19</sup> As a psychological metaphor we could also say that when insight generated by the autonomous psyche is aborted by the ego, the potential birth of a more differentiated conscious attitude is instantly lost. Lotto’s painting, and every other symbolic image of the Annunciation tells a different story, for it is not only Mary who exercises her own free will and accepts God’s will, Gabriel does so too. In this faithful attitude of conscious receptivity Mary and Gabriel are united and this union is conceptive.

Present at the Annunciation and at the Last Judgement, Gabriel is identified with both life and death. As a symbol, he represents both the beginning of the *prima materia* and the end of the opus, the life and death that are both present at the instant of incarnation. As the mediating messenger between the beginning and the end, and the divine spirit and earthly matter, Gabriel is closest to Mercurius, who is identified as the spirit of conjunction, the God of Revelation and devilish hell-fire. A paradoxical duality composed of hot and cold, wet and dry, good and evil, Mercurius is “the life-giving power like a glue, holding the world together and standing in the middle between body and spirit”.<sup>20</sup> This mercurial mediator could also be understood in Christian exegesis as the Holy Ghost, in alchemical language as the “subtle body”, and in Jungian terms, as psyche itself. All told, the ‘Gabriel’ dynamic is one of creative animation, a catalyst to the psychic process of renewal which is activated on a breathtaking knife’s edge spanning rational ego-consciousness and the mysterious and chaotic dimension of the objective psyche.

---

<sup>19</sup> Gustav Davidson, *A Dictionary of Angels*, 119.

<sup>20</sup> Happelius, 1659, quoted in C.G. Jung, “Mercurius as Soul”, (1943-48), CW, 13, 213, 263.

## THE VIRGIN AND HER CAT

In Lotto's *Annunciation* another tense and mysterious element is instantly communicated by the kneeling and enigmatic Virgin. With her body masked in thick robes and turned away from her book in the presence of an activated cat, her pose and garments suggest that divine incarnation, and the psychological renewal this implies, is a covered up and unseen process. It is not achieved above ground in the sun-drenched world of Apollonian intellect, but in an opposing and instinctual realm of the collective unconscious. In one momentous flash, the virgin Mary actually became The Virgin Mary and assumed her identity as the mother of the divine child who was a savior. This was not only a precise moment in serial time, but also one that was predestined in eternity.<sup>21</sup> Caught at the crux of these two realities, both temporal and eternal, Lotto's creative imagination unflinchingly presents a moment of intense conflict, wonder, mystery and danger that is unprecedented in the imagery of the Annunciation.

Viewed from close to, the look on Mary's face seems to express many things while making direct eye contact with the human viewer -- as if communicating mysterious inner knowledge that we share as her companions in experience (fig. 4). Mary's billowing robes and swollen belly suggest that even in the instant of creation her pregnancy is already full-term. Insights emerging from the unconscious in dreams, waking intuitions and active imaginations are often grasped in a startling and energized instant and when they do, they come to us fully formed. When this happens, we "get the picture."

---

<sup>21</sup> The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception was defined as dogma by the Catholic Church in *Ineffabilis Deus*, dated December 8, 1854, which certified that the Virgin, like her son was a "divine child", and that this sacred nature had been predestined since before the beginning of time.

Lotto's image also emphatically demonstrates that in the defining moment of becoming her-Self, the Virgin is turned away from the intimate, dreamy and introspective realm of her personal bedroom and intellectual book learning to be brought her face-to-face with the outside world. This moment of becoming and awakening is accentuated by the visceral dynamism and heightened emotional tenor of Lotto's dark "witch's cat" who carries the chthonic forces of the feminine and the uncanny, protective and instinctual realm of Hecate. Cats have always been closely identified with the eye and with divination, and *Mau*, the Egyptian name for cat -- the protagonist at the dead center of this image of creation, -- means "to see". "Psychology," Jung stated, "is the act of seeing," -- a reality set at the very heart of Lotto's painting.<sup>22</sup>

Undoubtedly, Mary's simultaneous identification as an ordinary woman with human reactions and a personal shadow and as a primordial archetype produces a thrilling dynamic tension that is the hallmark of Lotto's painting. Accompanied by her agitated cat the Lotto's Virgin is bathed in a host of shadowy allusions to darkness and the devil. Read together, Lotto's activated and enigmatic Virgin/Mother and her skittish feline companion span the complex feminine realm of the Three Fold Feminine Goddesses of Demeter: the supreme Mother Goddess, Persephone the Maiden, and Hecate, the sacred Hag of the underworld Together they personify Jung's description of the feminine, which he understood as a complicated, uncomfortable and conflicting "totality." Using an elegant poetic metaphor Jung described the dynamic fertility of the feminine ground of creation as such:

---

<sup>22</sup> . C.G. Jung, "Introduction to the Religions and Psychological Problems in Alchemy", ( 1944), CW 12, 15,13.

“Like the rose, the figure of the mother-beloved shines in all the hues of heavenly and earthly love. She is the chaste bride and whore who symbolizes the prima material, which ‘nature left imperfected’. It is clear from the material we have cited that this refers to the anima. She is that piece of chaos which is everywhere and yet hidden, she is that vessel of contradictions and many colors – a totality in the form of the *massa confusa*, yet a substance endowed with every quality in which the splendor of the hidden deity can be revealed.<sup>23</sup>

In Lotto’s hands the complex totality of the mysterious feminine realm of psychic receptivity and creative incubation communicates no sense of cold and sterilized perfection, but the fertile hot chaos of the *massa confusa*. There is no calm, only emotional agitation. Despite her discomfort and upset, Mary’s receptivity in the face of this divine commotion is absolute: “Behold the handmaiden of the Lord; be it done to me according to thy word” (Luke: 27-38). Like Persephone, the Virgin is raped and penetrated by a divine spirit and in accepting this fertilization she welcomes both life and death into her inexorably altered world. We can see by the way she looks outwardly, that she expects no less from us, the viewers of the divine incarnation. But are we up to it?

Individuation, which Jung described as the true purpose of human life, requires an attitude that is not only receptive, but also humble and consistently attentive. When Lotto’s Virgin accepts the divine masculine spirit from above, she is lowered, as if weighted down by a heavy burden. The fateful look in Mary’s eyes reflects a deep recognition of her task. For she not only must endure the birth of her divine child, but must tend it, just as we must nurture consciousness. Hence, we must look after the Self and *Its* interests with steady application -- no small

---

<sup>23</sup> C.J. Jung, “Rex and Regina,” (1955-56), CW, 14, 422.

task when one is asked to do it faithfully every single day without fail. The Virgin's pregnant glance that sees the challenges ahead seems to acknowledge the weighty burden of consciousness. Psychological insights penetrating ego-consciousness through the psychic image require respect, receptivity, and faithful nurture, but free will allows us to deny them. During the course of analysis, we can see many instances where neurotic patients (and ourselves) lack the receptive capability to hold on to the contents generated by the objective psyche. To integrate them, the conflicts they present to consciousness must be grappled with.

The transforming potential of the numinous experience and contact with the Self, which touched Lorenzo Lotto, is evident in the artist's young Virgin. Caught in a defining moment of destiny, she is as earthy and fresh as a peach ripe for the picking. Unclothed she would have the softness and sensuality of a shyly crouching antique Venus, but like the most ancient earth goddesses, this moon-faced girl expresses a hidden reality that is below ground, dark, unknowable and enigmatic. Like Persephone, who screamed when she was taken by Hades, Mary has been penetrated by a masculine spirit and seized by a destiny that will forever change and complicate her life. A mother already, Lotto's lowered young girl already carries the awesome gravitas, authority and protection conferred by the archetype of the Great Mother.

### **THE HOURGLASS AT THE BORDER OF TIME**

One final and unique element in Lotto's image of Annunciation is shown just behind the cat where a large hourglass set at the dead center of the composition is shown with the sand poised exactly half-way through the hour

while still running. This paradoxical circumstance seems to pose another question: What happens when the whole picture comes at once and insight is born in an instant?

The hourglass is a traditional symbol associated with death, which is commonly found in tombs and other *memento mori*, to remind us of the passing of time and human mortality. A symbol of death at the instant of life in Lotto's painting reminds us that they are born together. The hourglass, so strongly suggestive and unusual in this context, seems to inform the Virgin's steady gaze to us: she has said yes to both and so must we. The glass's setting at the exact point of the waxing and waning of the hour also brings to mind the lunar cycle. It draws an even stronger parallel to the Book of the Apocalypse of St. John, where chaos, dismemberment and the destruction of nature precede the establishment of the kingdom of Christ. These terrifying forces were unleashed on the earth at the half-hour after the seventh seal was broken:

And when he had opened the seventh seal, there was silence  
in heaven for half an hour.(CH 8:1)

The uncanny intersection of eternal and serial time symbolized by the hourglass is described by Jung as synchronicity -- a spontaneous and instantaneous moment when meaning is born in an individual through the mediation of the psyche. Jung speaks of foreknowledge as an aspect of synchronistic phenomena. Unknowable knowing echoing from the timeless, image-less and psychoid realm can come into human consciousness at an instant through synchronicity, which has the uncanny and emotional quality of revelation. In ancient Greek, the meaning of "revelation" is synonymous with "apocalypse" -- to uncover. Apocalypse implies a dramatic unveiling of something hidden and unseen, like the full-blown pregnancy masked beneath the Virgin's



thick robes. The ancient concept of apocalyptic revelation as forbidding, foreboding, and foretelling, finds its natural modern expression in synchronistic affect and foreknowledge.

Lotto's cat, which is placed in closest proximity to the symbolic hourglass set at a border of time, vividly suggests what Barbara Hannah called "cat instinct", an objective psychic factor which is independent, shrewd and almost wild. "The ingenuity of the cat", she states, "really comes far more directly from what Dr. Jung, in "Synchronicity" calls an absolute knowledge than from ordinary human consciousness", and it is this, she adds, that helps us when "we really cannot see our way."<sup>24</sup>

Like Lotto's image, our most modern creation myth, first proposed by the Belgian priest Georges Lemaitre in 1927, is apocalyptic. Although we have no proof and probably never will, it is widely accepted that the universe was created billions of years ago by a ferocious cosmic explosion that hurled matter in all directions. Lotto's picture packs its own Big Bang -- an explosive power of creation which blows away the cat and propels the Virgin out of her dream world into the light of consciousness. This is what can happen to us when the autonomous psychic complex is activated and in *that* incarnate instant, the apocalypse is *now*.

## CONCLUSION

Undoubtedly, the intense feeling tone of Lotto's *Annunciation* is one of revelation -- "an act of revealing or communicating divine truth, something that is revealed by God to man". When we have a new insight, perhaps from a dream

---

<sup>24</sup> Barbara Hannah, The Cat, Dog and Horse Lectures and 'The Beyond', Dean L. Frantz, ed., Wilmette, Illinois, 1992, 81f.

or an intuition, we often say that we “get it” as if we have received something or that we have “seen the light,” which implies a greater clarity of vision. However they come, revelations are incarnations, but Lotto’s image shows us that psychological renewal and insight is born of a numinous experience that is hard to endure. Lotto’s Virgin has given herself up to the life-altering, and sometimes life-threatening instant of creative incarnation, and, as her eyes indicate to the viewer, so must we. Suffering his own agitations and anxieties until he found peace within the house of Annunciation, Lotto experienced that creativity is born of chaos, not of order, and this is imaged in his picture. Creativity, which is an awesome experience of immediate knowledge from the objective psyche, requires that we give ourselves up to nature itself.

Awake or in dreams, the objective psyche continuously announces its reality to us in images, which carry an uncanny quality of lived experience. All intuitions, visions and active imaginations have a strongly felt reality to them, even when they seem to make no sense, and dreams affect the mood of the whole day, even if we don’t remember them. The big psychic events that sent the ancients to the oracle and native Americans to the medicine man carry the creative and transforming potential of the living symbol. This can only be incurred by an individual, who may experience it as a shocking, or even deathly instant. The dynamic subjective experience of the objective psyche is the fundamental basis of Jungian analysis and, in these terms, the *only* agent of healing. This psychological reality, of which Lotto had direct experience, is perfectly mirrored in his prescient image of divine commotion.

In the end, Lotto’s *Annunciation* tells us something important about the art of living and the practice of depth psychology. As a symbolic image of the spontaneous creativity of the psyche in action, and how *it* can transform *us*, it

serves as a perfect illustration of Jung's words given in his pioneering first seminar of Analytical Psychology in 1925:

“Suppose a patient comes to me with a great conflict and I say to him, ‘Read the Tao Te Ching or ‘Throw your sorrows on Christ.’ It is splendid advice, but what does it mean to the patient in helping his conflict? Nothing. To be sure, the thing for which Christ stands does work for Catholics and partly for Protestants, but it does not work for everybody; and nearly all my patients are people for whom the traditional symbols do not work. So our way had to be one where the creative character is present, where there is a process of growth which has the quality of revelation. Analysis should release an experience that grips us or falls upon us as from above, an experience that has substance and body, such as those things occurred to the ancients. If I were going to symbolize it, I would choose the Annunciation.<sup>25</sup>

**Irene Cioffi Whitfield** is a native New Yorker who received her Ph.D in Art History from the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, where she specialized in 18th century Italian Painting. Irene subsequently trained as a Jungian analytical psychologist with IGAP, London, where she is a Senior Analyst, and she is also a full member of the JPA in New York City. Her special interest is in the interface between art and psychology and in the dynamic nature of the creative process.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Berenson, Bernard, Lorenzo Lotto, An Essay in Constructive Art Criticism, London, 1895, (1901 ed.)

---

<sup>25</sup> C.G. Jung, CW, The Seminars, Vol. III, Analytical Psychology, Notes of the Seminar Given in 1925, (1925), ed. William McGuire, London, 1992, 80. I would like to thank Pedro Kujawski for pointing this passage out to me.

- Brown, D. A., Humfrey, P., Lucco, M., Lorenzo Lotto: Rediscovered Master of the Renaissance, (exh. Cat.), National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1997.
- Caroli, Flavio, Lorenzo Lotto e la nascita della psicologia moderna, Milan, 1980.
- Cross, F.L., and Livingstone, eds., The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, Oxford, 1984.
- Davidson, Gustav, A Dictionary of Angels, New York, 1967.
- Hannah, Barbara, The Cat, Dog and Horse Lectures and 'The Beyond', Dean L. Frantz, ed., Wilmette, Illinois, 1992.
- Jung, C. G., "On the Relation of Analytical Psychology to Poetry, (1922), The Spirit of Man, Art and Literature, Collected Works, Vol. 15., 65-83, London, 1990.
- \_\_\_\_\_, "On the Relation of Medicine and Psychotherapy," (1945) The Practice of Psychotherapy, Collected Works, Vol. 16, 84-93, London, 1990.
- \_\_\_\_\_, "The Dual Mother," (1936) The Symbols of Transformation, Collected Works, Vol. 5, 306-393, London, 1995.
- \_\_\_\_\_, "The Personification of the Opposites", (1955-56), Mysterium Coniunctionis, The Collected Works, Vol. 14, 89-257, London, 1992.
- \_\_\_\_\_, "The Spirit Mercurius," (1943/1948), Alchemical Studies, Collected Works, Vol. 13, 193-250, London 1981.
- \_\_\_\_\_, "Synchronicity: An Acausal Connecting Principle," (1952) The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche, Collected Works, Vol. 8, 421-504, London 1991.
- \_\_\_\_\_, "Rex and Regina," (1955-56), Collected Works, Vol. 14, 359, 506, London, 1992.
- \_\_\_\_\_, "Introduction to the Religions and Psychological Problems in Alchemy".( 1944), Collected Works, Vol. 12, 15,13, London 1981.
- \_\_\_\_\_, Collected Works, The Seminars, Vol. III, Analytical Psychology, Notes of the Seminar Given in 1925, (1925), ed. William McGuire, London, 1992.
- Vasari, Giorgio, Opere di Giorgio Vasari, Pittore e Architetto Arentino, Florence, MDCCCXXXII edition.